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ABOUT PORTFOLIO BLOG

HOPEFULLY THE LAST UPDATE TO THE DRUPAL FIASCO

POSTED ON OCTOBER 18, 2017 BY SONYA MANN

The following blog post won't make sense unless you followed the contentious process of Larry Garfield being exiled by Drupal's community leadership. A substantial portion of the community itself found that decision appalling, so there was a lot of backlash. Followed by counter-backlash. Then counter-counter-backlash.

I wrote two articles about the events as they were unfolding, back in early 2017, and you can catch up on the broad outlines by reading them:

- [“This Developer’s Sex Life Is Testing the Limits of Silicon Valley Tolerance”](#) (not the most accurate headline, since Silicon Valley had little to do with anything; unfortunately I couldn't control that)
- [“Defenders of Developer Banned for His Sci-Fi Sex Life Decry ‘Witch Hunt’ in Open Letter”](#)

As for primary documents, I recommend Larry Garfield's five blog posts about his side of events:

- [“TMI About me”](#)
- [“Response to conversations about me”](#)
- [“Regarding the continued mystery”](#)
- [“Don't go low”](#)
- [“Deception and discrimination in Drupal”](#)

And of course the two blog posts from the Drupal Association:

- “A Statement from the Executive Director”
- “Working through the concerns of our community”

You're also welcome to dig up the copious Medium, Twitter, and Reddit conversations.

At the center of the conflict — although the Drupal Association danced around saying so outright — was Larry Garfield's former Gorean partner. She was going by the name Ayelet at the time, and it's also the name she asked me to use when writing about her. Garfield and Ayelet had a Gor-style Master/slave relationship, a twist on the common BDSM arrangement.

Another twist: Ayelet was, and continues to be, nonverbal by choice. She also suffers from intense social anxiety. According to Ayelet and her partners, these symptoms are manifestations of her acute autism. Ayelet was in her early thirties during her relationship with Garfield.

Garfield brought Ayelet to a Drupal event, and people were confused and concerned by how they related to each other. Ayelet was perceived as oddly standoffish — to be fair, she is — and people didn't like that Garfield told her what to eat. In general, people interpreted their interpersonal dynamic as authoritarian. The worry was that Ayelet was being abused in some shape or form.

The Drupal Association got wind of this, along with sundry documentation of Garfield's interest in Gor. It's worth noting that Gor is a controversial flavor of kink, and enthusiasts' commitment can range from casual hobby to complete personal philosophy. On the continuum, Garfield appears to be closer to the latter, although he has disavowed the misogynistic aspects of Gor.

As you may have gathered from the preceding paragraphs, I've spoken to Ayelet, as well as her current partner, and the therapist she worked with while she was living with Garfield. In an extraordinary display of transparency, Ayelet and her current partner obtained all the notes that her then-therapist took when she was a patient, and shared them with me.

She also authorized the therapist to speak with me, so I could ask him questions. I verified his identity and contacted him independently. He requested that I not use his name because he doesn't want to be professionally

associated with the whole drama. At this point I'm just going to quote directly from the therapist's email to me, just cutting out Ayelet's legal name:

I am the therapist that worked with [redacted] aka Ayelet aka [redacted]. At the request of [redacted], Larry Garfield participated in sessions. At no point in our sessions did I communicate with Ayelet without Larry Garfield.

During the duration of our work together, I did not see any physical signs of abuse. No abuse was reported to me by [redacted] or by Larry. If there was any abuse going on, I was not aware of it. In my observations of [redacted] and Larry were operating in a fully consenting relationship between two adults both able of making independent decisions with regards to each person's well-being. It was not apparent that either [redacted] or Larry were a threat or danger to one another.

He added, "At no time in the course of the treatment did I feel I need to activate a duty to warn. In fact, the records reflect accurately my experience with [Ayelet] and Larry as best I can recall." What the records reflect is a profoundly emotionally troubled woman, who struggles with interacting with others, but is strongly bonded to her partner. My own interpretation is that Garfield acted as caretaker as much as romantic counterpart (as does Ayelet's current partner).

The therapist's statement, along with having reviewed his copious notes, leads me to personally feel about 95% sure that Ayelet's relationship with Garfield was unorthodox, certainly, but not abusive or otherwise unethical.

But there's that one complication he mentioned: "At no point in our sessions did I communicate with Ayelet without Larry Garfield."

Gathering the information for this update was difficult because of Ayelet's communication limitations. I don't blame her for that — disabilities are what they are — but it does make me uncomfortable from a reportorial perspective. Along with being nonverbal, Ayelet doesn't like to have her thoughts recorded permanently, regardless of the medium. She requested that I not quote her directly at all, only paraphrase her thoughts.

We were only able to speak with her current partner present. They flew out to San Francisco for this purpose, and we met at a hotel on September 22nd. She

typed on a computer to me, and also used American Sign Language with her partner, which he translated. She did correct him at times, and she showed me the computer directly, without always showing it to him too.

The most in-depth communication I got from Ayelet was a written statement that she prepared beforehand. This was a substantial concession on her part, she said, even though she was able to erase it immediately after I read it.

Ayelet wrote about how disenfranchised she felt by the whole Drupal ordeal: Her ability to consent dismissed, her perspective not sought by the Drupal authorities (according to her and her partner), and her loved ones endangered. She is now very concerned that her current partner, who takes her to professional events with him, will face the same outrage and ostracism that Garfield did. Ayelet described how hard it was for her to get to a place in her life where she could be herself, autism and anxiety and all, without having to contort her personality in order to survive. That sense of safety and comfort felt threatened. She and her partner say that the fears won't subside.

That's something I worried about a lot in writing this story. It's hard for me to imagine any other scenario where strangers' casual observations would cause me to question whether a couple's relationship was consensual. In general I go through life assuming that people's relationships are kosher, absent clear and obvious evidence otherwise, or an overt allegation from one of the partners. But because Ayelet is autistic and doesn't communicate in the ways that most people do, I was charged with falsifying the idea that she was essentially being held hostage.

I'm not sure what else I could have done. I still feel uneasy, worried about whether I handled reporting this update correctly. Should I have pushed harder to speak with Ayelet alone? Or would that be a cruel imposition on her? I don't know. Even though I feel that abuse is an extremely unlikely possibility, given the preponderance of evidence, there's no way for me to definitively state that Ayelet's relationships are *healthy*. I'm not qualified to make that judgment, and the level of access I'd require to even try is impossible.

So I don't know if I did this story justice.

And to be honest, when you really want to get a story right, that can be paralyzing. You write and rewrite and go to sleep thinking about how to frame

the events. The dual responsibilities are keenly felt: You have to be fair to the subjects of your story, and prove worthy of your sources' trust. Equally, you are obligated to be as transparent as possible with your readers and represent the information accurately. That's a hard balancing act, especially when you can only have an incomplete picture. The facts you're able to definitively state may be straightforward, but the way in which you contextualize them often isn't.

All of that is to say, I'm sorry that this update is messy and inelegant. If you have any questions, feel free to [email me](#). I'll edit this blog post with clarifications as needed. Here's a snapshot of the original version, for accountability's sake.

POSTED IN [BLOG](#) TAGGED [AYELET](#), [DRUPAL](#), [LARRY GARFIELD](#)

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